

Franchot swings at Purple Line

By: **HAYLEY PETERSON**

Examiner Staff

September 22, 2010

Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot on Wednesday criticized some of the Purple Line's costs and questioned the planned light rail's ability to win federal funding.

Franchot questioned the costs associated with the 16-mile light rail line that would connect New Carrollton and Bethesda and an expansion of Baltimore's subway system -- projects that aren't due for construction until 2016. He targeted planned contracts with two Baltimore engineering consultants estimated to cost \$160 million over eight years.

"It just strikes me that an eight-year, \$160 million commitment is an awful lot of money for an awful long time for, frankly, projects that are still -- speculative is probably too harsh a word, but the question of whether they are going to get funded is still up in the air," Franchot said during a Board of Public Works meeting on Wednesday.

Gov. Martin O'Malley has rolled out a six-year, \$90 million spending plan for the two light rail projects, with \$48 million going to the \$1.68 billion Purple Line. The state is hoping to win an additional \$225 million federal infusion.

Franchot said the contracts are a poor use of money when the state's existing transportation system is ailing.

"We just have an epidemic of potholes," he said, condemning the legislature for sucking \$160 million this year from highway user revenues, which help local governments pay for mending local roads.

"This is a crushing problem. ... It's going to cost us a lot down the road if we don't figure out how to get some of this money out to these needs."

Ehrlich has said he would ax the rail projects if he is elected in November and instead focus on fixing existing transportation infrastructure.

Franchot, on the other hand, couched his criticisms with statements supporting mass transit. And he joined the board in approving the contracts Wednesday.

The Maryland Transit Administration said the consultants are vital to obtaining federal funding.

"We are making sure we are meeting every federal requirement ... so that we are competitive when we go into that process [of obtaining funding]," said Henry Kay, deputy administrator of planning and engineering for MTA.

He said the agencies would provide engineering designs with the "quality, continuity and project knowledge ... that it takes to make sure we control the project resources."